

Cesar E. Chavez

“Cesar Estrada Chavez,” Senator Robert F. Kennedy noted, “was one of the heroic figures of our time...”

IN THE BEGINNING

An American hero, Cesar Chavez was a civil rights, Latino, farm worker, and labor leader; a religious and spiritual figure; a community servant and social entrepreneur; a crusader for nonviolent social change; and an environmentalist and consumer advocate.

A second-generation American citizen, Cesar was born on March 31, 1927, near his family's farm in Yuma, Arizona. At age 10, his family became migrant farm workers after losing their farm in the Great Depression. He learned about justice or rather injustice early in his life. Cesar grew up in Arizona; the small adobe home, where he was born was swindled from them by dishonest Anglos. His father agreed to clear eighty acres of land, in exchange he would receive the deed to forty acres of land that adjoined the home. The agreement was broken and they sold the land to a man named Justus Jackson. Cesar's father went to a lawyer who advised him to borrow money and buy the land. Later when Cesar's father could not pay the interest on the loan the lawyer bought back the land and sold it to the original owner. Cesar learned a lesson about injustice that he would never forget. Later, he would say, ‘The love for justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being but it is also the most true to our nature.’

In June 1939 his family moved to California and settled in San Jose. They lived in the barrio called Sal Si Puedes, “Get Out If You Can.” Cesar thought the only way to get out of the circle of poverty was to work his way up and send the kids to college. He and his family worked in the fields of California from Brawley to Oxnard, and many cities in between. He did not like school as a child, probably because he spoke only Spanish at home and the teachers were mostly Anglo who only spoke English. Spanish was forbidden in school. He remembers being punished with a ruler to his knuckles for violating the rule. Some schools in the area were segregated and he felt like a monkey in a cage in integrated schools. He also had to listen to a lot of racist remarks and seeing signs that read ‘Whites only’. He and his brother, Richard, attended thirty-seven elementary and middle schools. He felt that education had nothing to do with his farm worker/migrant way of life, so, in 1942; he graduated from the eighth grade where he had to end his formal education.

Although his formal education ended there, he possessed an intellectual curiosity, was self-taught in many fields and well read throughout his life. The walls of his office in La Paz (United Farm Worker Headquarters) are lined with hundreds of books ranging from cooperatives, economics, philosophy, and unions, to biographies on the Kennedy’s and Gandhi. He believed that, “The end of all education should surely be service to others,” a belief that he practiced until his untimely death.

Cesar joined the US Navy in 1946, and served in the Western Pacific in the aftermath of World War II. He returned from service to marry Helen Fabela in 1948, whom he had met working in the vineyards of central California. They settled in the East San Jose barrio of Sal Si Puedes (get out if you can), and would eventually have eight children and thirty-one grandchildren.

Cesar's life as a community organizer began in 1952 when he met Father Donald McDonnell. They talked about farm workers, strikes, and he began reading about St. Francis, Gandhi, and nonviolence. Later that year he met Fred Ross and joined the Community Service Organization (CSO), a prominent Latino civil rights group. While with the CSO, Cesar coordinated voter registration drives and conducted campaigns against racial and economic discrimination in mostly urban areas until he became the National Director of the CSO in the late 1950s and served into early 1960s.

THE UNITED FARM WORKERS

In 1962 Cesar resigned from the CSO and founded the National Farm Workers Association, later to become the United Farm Workers (UFW). That same year Richard Chavez designed the UFW Eagle and Cesar chose the black and red colors. From the symbol they created a flag and Cesar made reference to it by stating, "A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride . . . When people see it they know it means dignity."

In 1962, there were very few dues paying members. But by 1970 the UFW got grape growers to accept union contracts and effectively organized most of that industry, at one point they claimed 50,000 dues paying members. The reason was Chavez's tireless leadership and nonviolent tactics among which was the Delano grape strike, his fasts that focused national attention on farm workers problems and the 340-mile march from Delano to Sacramento in 1966. The farm workers and supporters carried banners with the black eagle that said HUELGA (Strike) and VIVA LA CAUSA (Long live our cause). The marchers wanted the state government to pass laws that would allow farm workers to organize a union and allow collective bargaining agreements. Cesar made people aware of the struggles of farm workers for better pay and safer working conditions. He succeeded through nonviolent boycotts, pickets, and strikes seeking recognition of the importance and dignity of all farm workers.

It was the beginning of La Causa. La Causa was supported by organized labor, religious groups, minorities, and students. Cesar Chavez trained his union workers and sent them into the cities where they were to boycott and picket as their weapon.

Another weapon of Cesar's fasting. In 1968 Cesar went on a water-only, 25 day fast. He repeated the fast in 1972 for 24 days, and again in 1988, for 36 days.

Cesar said about the fast, "A fast is first and foremost personal. It is a fast for the purification of my own body, mind, and soul. The fast is also a heartfelt prayer for purification and strengthening for all those who work beside me in the farm worker movement. The fast is also an act of penance for those in positions of moral authority and for all men and women activists who know what is right and just, who know that they could and should do more. The fast is finally a declaration of non-cooperation with supermarkets who promote and sell and profit from California table grapes. During the past few years I have been studying the plague of pesticides on our land and our food," Cesar continued "The evil is far greater than even I had thought it to be, it threatens to choke out the life of our people and also the life system that supports us all. This solution to this deadly crisis will not be found in the arrogance of the powerful, but in solidarity with the weak and helpless. I pray to

God that this fast will be a preparation for a multitude of simple deeds for justice. Carried out by men and women whose hearts are focused on the suffering of the poor and who yearn, with us, for a better world. Together, all things are possible.”

Cesar Chavez completed his 36-day Fast for Life on August 21, 1988. The Reverend Jesse Jackson took up where Cesar left off, fasting on water for three days before passing on the fast to celebrities and leaders. The fast was passed to Martin Sheen, actor; the Reverend J. Lowery, President SCLC; Edward Olmos, actor; Emilio Estevez, actor; Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Robert Kennedy, Peter Chacon, legislator, Julie Carmen, actress; Danny Glover, actor; Carly Simon, singer; and Whoopi Goldberg, actress.

“For more than three decades Cesar led the first successful farm workers union in American history, achieving dignity, respect, fair wages, medical coverage, pension benefits, and humane living conditions, as well as countless other rights and protections for hundreds of thousands of farm workers. Against previously insurmountable odds, he led successful strikes and boycotts that resulted in the first industry-wide labor contracts in the history of American agriculture. His union's efforts brought about the passage of the groundbreaking 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act to protect farm workers. Today, it remains the only law in the nation that protects the farm workers' right to unionize.” (UFW)

THE DEATH

Cesar Estrada Chavez died in his sleep on April 23, 1993 in San Luis, Arizona, a short distance from the small family farm in the Gila River Valley where he was born more than 66 years before.

The founder and president of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO was in Yuma helping UFW attorneys defend the union against a lawsuit brought by Bruce Church Inc., a giant Salinas, California based lettuce and vegetable producer. Church demanded that the farm workers pay millions of dollars in damages resulting from a UFW boycott of its lettuce during the 1980's. Rather than bring the legal action in a state where the boycott actually took place, such as California or New York, Church “shopped around” for a friendly court in conservative, agri-business dominated Arizona where there had been no boycott activity.

‘Cesar gave his last ounce of strength defending the farm workers in this case,” stated his successor, UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, who was with him in Arizona during the trial. He died standing up for their First Amendment right to speak out for themselves. He believed in his heart that the farm workers were right in boycotting Bruce Church Inc. lettuce during the 1980's and he was determined to prove that in court.” (The second multimillion dollar judgment for Church was later thrown out by an appeal's court. The company signed a UFW contract in May of 1996.)

THE LAST MARCH

Cesar Chavez was honored in death by those he led in life on April 29, 1993. On that day, more than 50,000 mourners came to honor him at the site of his first public fast in 1968 and his last in 1988, the United Farm Workers Delano Field Office at "Forty Acres."

It was the largest funeral of any labor leader in United States history. They came in caravans from Florida to California; farm workers, family members, friends and union staff took turns standing vigil over the plain pine coffin which held the body of Cesar Chavez. Among the honored guard were numerous celebrities who supported Chavez through his years of struggle to better the livelihood of farm workers throughout America.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney, who celebrated the funeral mass, called Chavez "a special prophet for the worlds' farm workers." Pall bearers' including a crew of these workers, Chavez children and grandchildren carried their leader to a resting place in La Paz, the UFW's California headquarters and was laid to rest near a bed of roses, in front of his office.

Cesar's life cannot be measured with material terms. He never earned more than \$6,000 a year, he never owned a house, and, when Cesar passed, he had no savings to leave his family.

His motto in life, "si se puede" (it can be done), embodies the rare and precious legacy he left the world. Since his death, dozens of communities across the nation have renamed libraries, parks, schools, streets, awards and scholarships in his honor, as well as enacting holidays on his birthday, March 31.

"In 1993, his family and friends established the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation to educate people about the life and work of this great American civil rights leader, and to engage all, particularly youth, to carry on his values and timeless vision for a better world." (Chavez Foundation)

On August 8, 1994, Helen Chavez, Cesar's widow, accepted the Medal of Freedom for her late husband from President Clinton at a White House ceremony. In the address accompanying America's highest civilian honor, the President praised Chavez for having "faced formidable, often violent opposition with dignity and nonviolence."

UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, Chavez's successor, thanked the President on behalf of the United Farm Workers and commented, "Every day in California and in other states where farm workers are organizing, Cesar Chavez lives in their hearts. Cesar lives wherever Americans' he inspired work nonviolently for social change."

Sources and Resources for further research

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